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ABSTRACT

Just as prejudicial stereotypes about race, sex, social class, and physical appearance have led to inhuman treatment, similar biased concepts exist that support inhuman and oppressive treatment of children. Various "childist" concepts categorize children as property, uncivilized devils, lumps of clay, tiny adults, or infallible angels. Exploitation, abuse, neglect, and unrealistic parent attitudes and behavior may result from such childist beliefs. Viewing the child as a developing person includes the beliefs that children are persons of worth and full citizens sharing basic rights to life, safety, happiness, equality of treatment, equality of opportunity, reasonable self-determination, and due process. Because children are developing persons, their potential for growth, loving, and significance can be realized or thwarted and damaged. How children are valued and nurtured is of the utmost importance. Needs for adequate nutrition and health, justice, love, education, and meaningful work are best met in a manner appropriate to children's developmental status. As persons, children organize perceptions of "self" and "world" into a meaningful life-world and act in accordance with it. Because children are developing persons, their experientially learned perceptions of self and others, of justice and democracy, of human life and human relationships are also of the utmost importance. (RH)

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CHILDISM AND ITS DESTRUCTIVE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

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Philosophers have shown that we make assumptions which determine our conclusions and actions. Inaccurate assumptions prevent finding effective solutions to many problems and can cause actions that make matters worse. Therefore identifying and replacing inaccurate assumptions about children and society is important before we begin to think about how we will treat children and what type of social programs we will develop.

When this country was founded, people thought as subjects of a monarch who was chosen by god to rule over them. A person's relationship to the king determined their worth and way of treating others. All was integrated into a coherent and self-perpetuating life-world. To psychologically separate from England, Americans had to put together a new life-world that integrated an awareness of self as free and equal with the concept that government was to be for the people. Old concepts of rank and elitism based on assumptions that birth and social class produced worth had to eliminated. The awareness that all were created equal by god gave birth to new relationships based upon concepts of equality, due process, and basic rights.

A similiar process has begun on behalf of equality for blacks and women. Prejudicial beliefs held by the oppressed and the oppressors need to be identified, challenged, and replaced.

Just as prejudicial stereotypes about race, sex, social class, and physical appearance have led to inhuman treatment, similiar biased conceptions of children exist that support the inhuman and oppressive treatment of children. A similiar process of consciousness raising and changing needs to occur on behalf of children. Childist concepts need to be identified and replaced with the understanding of children as developing persons.

FIVE PREVALENT FORMS OF CHILDISM.

Our most accurate and productive understanding of a child is the concept of a DEVELOPING PERSON. While some disagreement occurs over what this means in specific situations, most disagreement about handling children involves different beliefs about the basic nature of children. Usually one or more of five prevalent forms of childism are involved. These understand a child to be;

A Property.
An Uncivilized Devil.
A Lump of Clay.
A Tiny Adult
An Infallable Angel

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THE CHILD AS A PROPERTY

When children are understood as possessions, adults use them

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for their own profit or pleasure. Children's feelings, ideas, and needs are disregarded. They are denied essential legal rights, self-determination, and sometimes life itself.
This concept differs from the religious concept of parental stewardship and the democratic concept of children as full citizens. While recognizing parent's responsibility to guide children, they both expect parents to respect children's basic rights and raise them according to society's most basic legal and moral principles.

> Thinking of children as property goes way back in history. Many cultures have allowed parents to kill unwanted children, sell them into slavery, force them to work long hours, or deny them needed health care or education. Unfortunately some countries still do.
>
> Thinking of children as parental property is still prevalent in America. A recent California court decision upheld the right of a retarded boy's parents to deny him a heart operation that could have cured his heart failure. While the risk of surgery was given consideration, the court also recognized the validity of the parent's plea that prolonging the retarded boy's life would place an unreasonable burden upon the family since they would have to care for him if his life was prolonged. The court further refused to terminate parental custody so placement with another family was not possible. To logically arrive at such a conclusion, one must accept a number of assumptions. The first is that this retarded boy is a property of his parents and cannot be taken from his owners and placed with a family that is more accepting of his retardation and desire to live a longer and healthier life. The second is that this boy lacks an independent right to life and therefore his parents can choose to shorten his life if they choose to do so.
>
> Similiar attitudes that children are the property of their parents prevent us from speaking to parents when we observe them beating or humiliating their children.

THE CHILD AS AN UNCIVILIZED DEVIL

The belief that children are uncivilized devils takes two slightly different forms.

> One form sees children as ignorant and lacking proper motivation and training. External rewards and coercion are used to civilize the "savage". Children are not given any say since they lack knowledge and cannot be trusted to choose intelligently. They are not believed to want education or competence and so their activities are tightly structured and supervised.

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The harsher form is convinced that children are basically evil. Demonic possession either began at birth, as the result of original sin or faulty genetic wiring, or took place later when a "normal" child became possessed. The basic problem is not ignorance or laziness but children's deliberate decision to be disobedient or evil and their enjoyment of it. Such children cannot be reasoned with or trusted. Love will be misunderstood or taken advantage of. They can only be controlled by pain, fear, and superior physical force. If they cannot be intimated or punished into obedience, they must be locked up or destroyed.

The devil theory is held by many parents that physically abuse children and many advocates of corporal punishment and punitive coercive discipline.

It is also unfortunately the basis of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to uphold corporal punishment by the Dade County Florida School System. In that case a number of blacks were paddled so severely that two were hospitalized for painful hematomas on their buttocks. One was punished for making an obscene phone call that another later confessed to making. The other's crime was that he had arrogantly wiped off an auditorium seat with a hankerchief before he sat down. The Supreme Court concluded that this form of punishment is a necessary educational technique and not a violation of their basic rights. It only makes sense if one believes there are really children who are devils that will only respond to physical pain.

Jokes and horror stories about evil children help sell the concept of demonic possession. Unlike discussions where constructive ways of working with children's problems are sought; many stories shared in teacher's lounges, legislative conferences, or made into movies are only intended to reinforce prejudice against children and justify their punitive treatment. Just as it is important to confront racist or sexist jokes, childist jokes and attitudes need to be challenged.

THE CHILD AS A LUMP OF CLAY

When children are seen as lumps of clay, they are believed to be pliable and to lack any important enduring inner structure or unfolding potential that can be hurt. Parents and society deliberately mold them by rewarding and extinguishing their behavior. Being products of their environment, children are often absolved of responsibility for what they do. They can be scared, abandoned, made fun of, emotionally hurt, or be moved from one environment, school, or parent to another since they will recover easily. Changing children is attempted by modifying their

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environment and treatment. There is no need for personal therapy or to be concerned with the meanings that the child is forming and using.

The concept of children as easily molded lumps of clay is being used when:

- Specific behaviors are reinforced without helping children understand themselves, the world about them, or the reasons for such behavior.
- Parents impose their goals on children and coerce them to excel in sports, be popular, or follow careers that are not of their own choosing.
- Adults degrade, tease, scare, or treat children like ping-pong balls in custody settlements.
- Caseworkers make insensitive decisions to remove children from foster homes because they are getting overly attached or refuse to let foster families adopt them.
- Adults do not supervise children's TV or movie watching. Vulnerable young children are exposed to horror movies because adults do not understand they are still forming basic trust and are not as able to distinguish fantasy from reality.
- Young people experiment with drugs, believing that any bad effects on their minds or bodies will be reversible.

THE CHILD AS A TINY ADULT

When children are seen as tiny adults, their basic structure is believed to be fixed and complete, not still being formed. Children are expected to be rational and in complete control of their actions and feelngs. It is believed that they can delay current gratification for future gain and govern their behavior by their knowledge of probable consequences. Deprivation or devaluation may cause bad feelings but this does not alter the basic personality. Positive experiences are nice but not essential. Children do not have to experience love and beauty or develop literary, intellectual, musical, artistic, athletic, creative, or interpersonal competencies. Like balloons, tiny adults are pumped up with food and facts till they become big adults. Growth is getting bigger not forming something new.

When children are thought of as tiny adults:

- School boards and administrations eliminate all but the "basics" from the educational curriculum.
- Teachers consider that the way they teach and treat children is unimportant as long as the work gets covered.
- Adults fail to understand the developmental significance of children's play and discourage it or think they can substitute passive entertainment, such as TV watching.
- Adults get angry at children for needing attention and expect them to be able to sit still, control emotions, delay gratification, and learn from punishment.
- Legislatures pass punitive laws, believing that fear of consequences will reduce delinquency.

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Adults encourage young adolescents to experiment with sex and drugs, believing that their identity is securely formed and they can handle these experiences.

THE CHILD AS AN INFALLABLE ANGEL

The concept of the child as an infallable angel refers to the naive belief that children know what is best for them and will grow automatically if adults leave them alone and do not impose their ideas and values. Children are allowed to do and get what they want. Adult efforts to help or intervene are believed to be ineffectual or to make matters worse.

This unrealistic notion has to be distinguished from the important understanding, essential to all healthy parenting, that all children are of basic worth, have the capacity to love and the right to reasonable self-determination.

Belief in the infallibility of children underlies laissez-faire parenting and teaching that fail to provide children the fair environment and adequate stimulation or fair environment their growth requires. Children may be socially promoted to academic levels they cannot handle, increasing feelings of academic incompetence. Young people are left to cope with powerful peer pressures and often vicious persecution. In addition to feeling abandoned, they come to feel that nothing is of any ultimate value. Their parents, lacking any deep integrity, communicate nothing of ultimate value to their children and accept anything they do.

This belief causes parents to tolerate and encourage the destructive expression of feelings. Being entitled to feelings is mistakenly extended into the right to indiscriminately destroy property and hurt others. Never experiencing honest feedback or logical consequences, children do not learn responsibility or respect for others.

THE CHILD AS A DEVELOPING PERSON

As persons;

children are of worth and full citizens that share the basic rights to life, safety, happiness, equality of treatment, equality of opportunity, reasonable self-determination, and due process.

Because they are developing persons;

their potential for growth, loving, and significance can be realized or thwarted and damaged. How children are valued and nurtured is of the utmost importance. Needs for adequate nutrition and health, justice, love, education, and meaningful work need to be met in a manner appropriate to their developmental status.

As persons;

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children organize perceptions of "self" and "world" into a meaningful life-world and act in accordance with it.

Because they are developing;

the meanings of self and others, of justice and democracy, of human life and human relationship that children learn experientially are of the utmost importance.

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